

Routledge Studies in Media, Communication,
and Politics

Digitizing Democracy

Edited by Aljosha Karim Schapals, Axel Bruns, and Brian McNair

Communicating Populism

Comparing Actor Perceptions, Media Coverage, and Effects on Citizens
in Europe

*Edited by Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg, Frank
Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese*

Communicating Populism

Comparing Actor Perceptions,
Media Coverage, and Effects
on Citizens in Europe

**Edited by Carsten Reinemann,
James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg,
Frank Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese**

First published 2019
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2019 Taylor & Francis

The right of Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-39272-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-40206-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv

1 Introduction: Comprehending and Investigating Populist Communication From a Comparative Perspective	1
CARSTEN REINEMANN, JAMES STANYER, TORIL AALBERG, FRANK ESSER, AND CLAES H. DE VREESE	

PART I	
Populism and Communicators	15

2 Perceptions of Populism and the Media: A Qualitative Comparative Approach to Studying the Views of Journalists and Politicians	17
SUSANA SALGADO AND JAMES STANYER	

3 Journalists' Perceptions of Populism and the Media: A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews	34
JAMES STANYER, SUSANA SALGADO, GIULIANO BOBBA, GERGŐ HAJZER, DAVID NICOLAS HOPMANN, NICOLAS HUBÉ, NORBERT MERKOVITY, GÖKAY ÖZERIM, STYLIANOS PAPATHANASSOPOULOS, KAREN B. SANDERS, DUSAN SPASOJEVIC, AND LENKA VOCHOCOVÁ	

- 4 **Politicians' Perceptions of Populism and the Media: A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews** 51
 SUSANA SALGADO, JAMES STANYER, GERGŐ HAJZER, DAVID NICOLAS HOPMANN, BENTE KALSNES, GUIDO LEGNANTE, ARTUR LIPÍŃSKI, NORBERT MERKOVITY, STYLIANOS PAPATHANASSOPOULOS, AND KAREN B. SANDERS

PART II**Populism in the Media** 69

- 5 **Dimensions, Speakers, and Targets: Basic Patterns in European Media Reporting on Populism** 71
 SINA BLASSNIG, PATRICIA RODI, KEREN TENENBOIM-WEINBLATT, KINGA ADAMCZEWSKA, LILIA RAYCHEVA, SVEN ENGESSER, AND FRANK ESSER
- 6 **Journalistic Culture, Editorial Mission, and News Logic: Explaining the Factors Behind the Use of Populism in European Media** 102
 PETER MAURER, NICOLAS HUBÉ, VÁCLAV ŠTĚTKA, CRISTINA CREMONESI, ANTONELLA SEDDONE, SIGNE RINGDAL BERGAN, JAMES STANYER, MARIAN TOMOV, NAAMA WEISS, SVEN ENGESSER, AND FRANK ESSER
- 7 **Event-, Politics-, and Audience-Driven News: A Comparison of Populism in European Media Coverage in 2016 and 2017** 123
 FRANK ESSER, AGNIESZKA STĘPIŃSKA, ONDŘEJ PEKÁČEK, ANTONELLA SEDDONE, STYLIANOS PAPATHANASSOPOULOS, DOBRINKA PEICHEVA, ANA MILOJEVIC, SINA BLASSNIG, AND SVEN ENGESSER

PART III**Populism and Citizens** 141

- 8 **The Persuasiveness of Populist Communication: Conceptualizing the Effects and Political Consequences of Populist Communication From a Social Identity Perspective** 143
 MICHAEL HAMELEERS, CARSTEN REINEMANN, DESIRÉE SCHMUCK, AND NAYLA FAWZI

- 9 **Investigating the Effects of Populist Communication: Design and Measurement of the Comparative Experimental Study** 168
 MICHAEL HAMELEERS, IOANNIS ANDREADIS, AND CARSTEN REINEMANN
- 10 **Cognitive Responses to Populist Communication: The Impact of Populist Message Elements on Blame Attribution and Stereotyping** 183
 NICOLETA CORBU, LINDA BOS, CHRISTIAN SCHEMER, ANNE SCHULZ, JÖRG MATTHES, CLAES H. DE VREESE, TORIL AALBERG, AND JANE SUITER
- 11 **Attitudinal and Behavioral Responses to Populist Communication: The Impact of Populist Message Elements on Populist Attitudes and Voting Intentions** 207
 IOANNIS ANDREADIS, CRISTINA CREMONESI, EVANGELIA KARTSOUNIDOU, DOMINIKA KASPROWICZ, AND AGNIESZKA HESS

PART IV**Conclusion** 233

- 12 **Adapting to the Different Shades of Populism: Key Findings and Implications for Media, Citizens, and Politics** 235
 CLAES H. DE VREESE, CARSTEN REINEMANN, JAMES STANYER, FRANK ESSER, AND TORIL AALBERG

- Appendix A: Comparative Experiment: Stimuli for All Eight Conditions* 253
- Appendix B: Comparative Experiment: Background Characteristics of Respondents (Entire Sample vs. Cleaned Sample)* 261
- Appendix C: Comparative Experiment: Blame Perceptions (Overall Means by Country; 7-Point Scale)* 264
- Appendix D: Comparative Experiment: Stereotypes (Overall Means by Country; 7-Point Scale)* 266
- List of Contributors* 268
- Index* 271

3 Journalists' Perceptions of Populism and the Media

A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews

James Stanyer, Susana Salgado, Giuliano Bobba, Gergő Hajzer, David Nicolas Hopmann, Nicolas Hubé, Norbert Merkovich, Gökay Özerim, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Karen B. Sanders, Dusan Spasojevic, and Lenka Vochocová¹

Introduction

While numerous studies have looked at the media coverage of populism and populist politicians (for a synoptic account, see Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017), few, if any, have sought to try to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of those seeking to report on populism. Given the importance of the media to the spread and success of populist parties across Europe, understanding the perceptions of journalists is crucial. The news media are a central source of political information for publics and politicians, and journalists are key in shaping that information. In this volume, Maurer et al. observe that journalists' perceptions are influential on the 'way news stories and opinion pieces are written, including the decision about if and what populist messages should be included' (p. 104). In this context, it is important to know how journalists understand the political phenomenon they report on and how they make sense of it. While there have been numerous studies of journalists' perceptions in different contexts (see, for example, Strömbäck & Karlson, 2011; Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014), as far as we can tell, journalistic understandings of populism have not been explored in any depth and none, to our knowledge, have done this in a comparative context.

Journalists operate with working definitions of who populists are and what populism is but populism has been described as a slippery concept, difficult to define (Taggart, 2000). How do journalists comprehend what is or is not populist? Definitions are important in labeling parties and actors and drawing an audience's attention to those actors and their policy positions. We do not know what kind of definitions journalists use. Are the labels applied with any critical reflection? Do negative definitions

dominate? It might well be that the dominant perceptions are negative. The majority of previous research suggests that populism has primarily negative consequences for democracies, but it was not clear whether this view is shared among journalists (Bartolini, 2011; Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Mudde, 2004; Pasquino, 2008). It could be that views are more nuanced. For instance, it might be important to determine if these parties are on the left, or right, of the political spectrum.

If journalists' perceptions are unknown, their thoughts about the causes and consequences of populism are also unknown. For example, what do journalists attribute responsibility for the rise of populism to? Is it mainly to demand factors such as immigration or the economic crisis, or to supply-side factors such as the charismatic qualities of particular politicians? Again, in terms of the social and political consequences of populism, do journalists see these as negative in the main? We might expect negative perceptions to dominate, but we do not know. Finally, what do journalists make of the role of the media in the rise and spread of populism? Research in this volume sheds light on populist media and media reporting of populists. It suggests that the media may well play a role in the promotion of populism and populists.

Previous research has observed that journalists, as a profession, share much across borders, including 'coherent values, role perceptions and beliefs' (see Pfetsch, 2014). Given this, we might expect that there is sufficient commonality in how those interviewed understand populism, its causes and consequences, their own role, and that of the media more generally, in its spread. These common understandings might emerge from journalists' news consumption as part of an inter-media agenda-setting process and the ubiquity of news online (Cassidy, 2007). That said, it could be that some clear differences emerge. For example, in this volume, Maurer et al. find that the more adversarial role perceptions are rooted in a country, the more populism is reported—similarly with predominance of market-oriented role perceptions. Whereas, where pedagogic role perceptions are more engrained, populist messages are less prevalent in that country. These are of course correlations, but they suggest that understandings of populism may differ according to varying journalistic role perceptions.

Another source of distinction might be related to the media outlet within which journalists work. Mazzoleni (2014) argues that tabloid media play a role in the promulgation of populism and are most likely to 'give passionate attention to what happens in the usually animated precincts of populist movements' (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003, p. 16; see also Stanyer, 2007). However, in this volume Maurer et al. found that across all countries in their sample, there was no relationship between the volume of populist news stories and whether a media outlet was mass-market or up-market (but see Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018 for somewhat different findings).

On the political front, events and circumstances in national political life such as the presence, success, or failure of populist politicians, can

be said to exert an important influence on how populism, its causes, and its consequences might be understood. In several countries in the study, populist parties were in power and it is possible that this might exert some influence on perceptions (see Hameleers et al., 2018, for a similar argument and findings supporting this notion).

As noted in the chapter by Salgado and Stanyer, this current chapter draws on qualitative research interviews to provide an insight into the views of news professionals across 13 countries from Northern, Eastern, and Southern Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Czech Republic; Denmark; France; Greece; Hungary; Romania; Italy; Portugal; Serbia; Spain; and Turkey). The aim of the in-depth interviews has been to tease out journalists' understanding of populism, allowing journalists to respond in their own words. More information about methods used in the study can be found in the chapter by Salgado and Stanyer. This chapter focuses on five key areas which guided the qualitative interviews. These are: what journalists understand by the concept of populism; the identification of populist politicians; the issues most related to the rise of populism; its perceived consequences; and, whether the media are supportive, critical, or, indeed, whether they behave in a populist manner.

Understanding What Is Meant by Populism

At the start of the interviews, journalists were asked what they understood by the term populism, in order to learn more about what they recognize as populism and how they perceive it. The aim was to elicit some working definitions that they employ to decide who, in the world of politics, is populist and who is not. Some of the main themes which emerged from the responses of the journalists, are set out below.

Populism as an Ideology

Most (for a definition of how this term is used, please see the chapter by Salgado and Stanyer) interviewees saw populism as an ideology or something related to the appeal of individual politicians. Further, it was often made sense of as a general trend in the European and international context (especially in relation to the US, Russia, and Venezuela). Only a minority (for a definition of how this term is used, please see chapter by Salgado and Stanyer) of those interviewed provided a weak and unclear definition of populism.

Populism as an Electoral Strategy

For some journalists interviewed, populism could be considered 'a necessary and universal political strategy', given there were 'traces of populism in the program of almost every political party' (Czech Republic). Populism is, according to this opinion, 'aimed at voting' (Greece), or 'political

marketing' (Czech Republic). Some emphasized the more negative elements of this, describing it as shallow, akin to the 'selling of appearances' (Spain), part of the political game, full of 'demagogy and over-simplification' (Portugal) in order 'to gain popularity with over-simplistic messages' (Portugal and Hungary), with no 'real value proposals' (Portugal). But, in this context, a majority (for a definition of how this term is used, please see Chapter 2 in this volume) spoke of 'lies' and 'manipulation' and making 'unrealistic promises', while others observed it was appealing to 'the lowest passions' (Serbian journalist) of voters. The general view was that populism was not specific to any party, but more a means of achieving electoral success via dishonesty and manipulation. These views were expressed in all the countries of our sample.

Populism as a Problematic Concept

Some journalists were more critical of the concept itself, especially those from France (Hubé & Truan, 2016). The French journalists interviewed considered populism a 'buzzword in the media, an insult to defame a political opponent'. The Romanian and Italian journalists were also critical of the interpretative dimension of this concept ('The ideological positions of these movements strongly differs') (Italian journalist), so that populism is a tool to describe political competition. Similarly, a Czech journalist with a center-right perspective considered populism an artificial label used to discredit political opponents, and he refused to differentiate between populist and traditional politics since populist tendencies can be, according to him, traced to the program of any political party.

Populism as Pejorative Label

The interviews also explored whether journalists saw populism as a positive or negative force or something that had both positive and negative impacts. Across all 13 countries, populism was seen overwhelmingly as negative, with most considering it to be a malign force. This was similar to the views of the politicians interviewed, with the exception of those from populist parties (see Salgado et al. in this volume). In comparison, there were far fewer mixed responses, and only a small number of journalists in eight countries acknowledged any positive aspects. There were no clear patterns in the mixed responses, which came from journalists across the political spectrum and from those working for different media outlets. The most positive views came from a journalist who worked for an online right-wing populist media outlet in Hungary.

Identifying Populist Politicians

Interviewees were asked to provide examples of populist politicians, both in their own countries and abroad. Most were able to name at least one

politician in their own country. In some countries, there was a clear consensus across the different media outlets about who these actors were. In Bosnia, for example, those journalists questioned referred to Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian politician. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić was mentioned. In Spain, journalists referred to Pablo Iglesias and Podemos. In most countries, journalists mentioned two or more examples. In the Czech Republic, the November 2017 election results signified a huge shift in Czech politics, as the established parties lost a significant part of their electoral support and previous minority or non-parliamentary parties succeeded. Three (out of four) journalists named those new party leaders (new Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, a Czech oligarch; President Miloš Zeman or, more generally, the ANO movement) as the ideal representation of populism. In some countries where populist parties have been successful in recent elections (Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, and Serbia), journalists named a current party leader (for example Alexis Tsipras, Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon) as quintessentially populist.

In several instances, though, the journalists avoided or refused to give an example, or suggested that all politicians could be populist. For example, in Hungary, only one journalist cited Viktor Orbán; the others declined to name anyone. In some cases, there seemed to be a reluctance to point to an obvious example. In Turkey, none of the journalists labeled Turkish President Erdoğan as populist despite this label being applied elsewhere in Western news media.

When asked to provide examples of a populist politician outside of their country, most had a similar idea of who was a populist politician. There is clearly a common idea among the journalists of the personification of a populist politician. All interviewees identified Donald Trump; others, but not all, mentioned Marine Le Pen in France, Beppe Grillo in Italy, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Nigel Farage in the UK. All of these actors have been especially prominent in international news over the period of the study.

In addition to internationally newsworthy politicians, interviewees also mentioned examples in neighboring countries, or countries where there was some cultural affinity. For example, respondents from Bosnia named a politician in Croatia; those from Serbia mentioned Vladimir Putin (a name absent from other interviews); those from Turkey mentioned the AfD in Germany and Alexis Tsipras in Greece. Overall, there were no clear patterns by country, media type, or political persuasion in terms of identifying populist politicians.

In sum, the interviews provided insight into the working definitions of populism used by journalists. For some, populism was an ideology and for others an electoral strategy implemented by politicians. Others still were critical of the term, seeing it as a problematic label and, as some noted, an 'empty signifier' (Spain) or an 'empty vessel' (Czech Republic). Most

saw populism as unequivocally negative with only a minority mentioning possible positive aspects. All could point to parties and politicians widely understood to be populist.

When the authors looked for any evidence of difference between countries, type of media (TV, print, or Internet), or effect of the political positioning of the media, little could be found. Indeed, journalists working for populist-supporting media outlets defined populism similarly to journalists working for mainstream or serious news media.

Reasons for the Popularity of Populist Leaders and Parties

Journalists were asked what they considered to be the reasons for the popularity of populist leaders and parties, and about the social issues most linked to the rise of populism in their countries. The aim was to tease out any significant themes related to populism expressed by journalists. This section seeks to identify any shared or unique features which journalists consider to be important in understanding the rise of populism in their country, including the impact of international and/or national factors, the part played by the personal characteristics of particular political actors, and the possible role of the media. The journalists' responses were divided into demand-side factors, deriving from international and national political and economic conditions, and supply-side factors, related to the nature of the populist response (see Mudde, 2007).

Demand-Side Factors

Immigration

Starting with the demand-side conditions, the most common theme raised by all countries and by the majority of journalists was immigration and the refugee crisis, which is an understandable finding given the migration of people from the Middle East to Europe, and the capability of European leaders to form an effective response to the crisis. In the case of Italy, this can be understood as a consequence of the fact that Italy has proven to be an important host country in Europe for refugees and immigrants. However, immigration was also mentioned in countries not strongly affected by the European migration crisis. The example of the Czech Republic, where immigration is considered one of the main populist topics despite the fact that its impact on the country was minimal, reveals, according to Czech journalists, ways in which populists use these 'made-up problems' to exploit peoples' fears and their 'feeling of being under threat, both from the inside and from the outside'. Journalists from Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Turkey emphasized the migrant crisis and the associated perceived economic strains.

While in most countries immigration was seen as the main issue associated with the rise of populism, this was by no means the same for all countries. Among the 13 countries, journalists in Spain, Bosnia, and Romania, regardless of the political orientation of media outlets, did not associate populism with immigration or the refugee crisis at all. Economic issues were seen as important factors in Spain, Greece, and Romania, and a number of nationally specific issues also emerged (see below).

Financial Crisis

Many interviewees mentioned economic issues as one of the main drivers of populist support. The economic recession beginning in 2008, and the period of economic austerity and unemployment that followed, was cited as a significant factor by journalists from Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal (see also, for example, de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018, and the introduction to this book). In some cases, such as Italy, the disadvantaged economic position of the younger generation with poor job prospects was perceived as a precondition for populist popularity. In Italy, two of the journalists interviewed suggested that younger voters with no memory of war and dictatorship had little knowledge of, or interest in, politics, and their disengagement had also contributed to the rise of populism. Journalists from Bulgaria cited disparities between their country and older and wealthier EU Member States as providing fertile ground for populism. This observation seems to echo the idea that *relative deprivation* may be a key driver of populist success (see the chapter by Hameleers, Andreadis, & Reinemann in this volume).

Spanish and Romanian journalists made connections between the financial crisis and the increase of inequality, income and social welfare issues, poverty risk, unemployment and corruption—all described as social scourges. However, for journalists belonging to countries outside the Eurozone (such as Hungary and Turkey), financial recession was not perceived as a topic associated with populism.

A range of issues connected to the financial crisis were also mentioned. These included unemployment or low wages (Portugal, Greece, Hungary, Spain, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, France); low living standards among European citizens, which took many forms, such as poverty (Hungary, Spain, Serbia, Bulgaria); home evictions (Spain); social inequality (Italy, Spain, France, Czech Republic); retirement reforms (Denmark, Serbia); taxes (Denmark, France, Czech Republic); corruption (Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria, Serbia, Czech Republic); or promises of lowering prices of selected popular goods as a populist strategy (Czech Republic).

Nationalism and Ethnic Minorities

The examples of Bosnia and Serbia reveal how specific national contexts and history influence the topics set by populist politicians—it is

predominantly the ethnic issues clearly related to national and ethnic relationships in former Yugoslavian countries (ethnic rights and territorial divisions, centralization vs. further division of the country, nationalism as the consequence of the breakup of Yugoslavia) that journalists in Serbia and Bosnia, regardless of their ideological inclinations, mention as priorities on the populist agenda. Bulgarian journalists stressed the importance of 'the catastrophic demographic problem' (aging, emigration, low birth rate) leading nearly to the 'disappearance' of Bulgaria and the unresolved ethnic problem (the integration of the Roma people) as the main populist issues. Fear of terrorism was also raised (Portugal).

Religion

In France, journalists considered Islam to be an issue and explained the predominance of Islamophobia in populist rhetoric as a consequence of the proliferation of jihadist attacks in France, and the concentration of people of Muslim faith in certain, often disadvantaged, districts of large French cities. In Turkey, journalists raised religious issues, the Kurdish question, ethnicity, cultural diversity, and security concerns. Most of these special issues of a local nature, combined with other more usual topics such as the refugee crisis and wages, are seen by the three Turkish journalists not merely as the cause of populism, but as a servant of it.

Two Spanish journalists, working for right-wing and left-wing outlets, raised specific social themes. The first related populism to the decline of important institutions, such as church and family. Specifically, he referred to the special issue of anti-clericalism, aimed at educating people to hate the institution of the Church, as well as to a 'tribal education conception', meaning the disappearance of family unity ('traditional family' as an important populist topic is also mentioned by a Romanian journalist with a center-left leaning). The second journalist associated populism with the reformation of the education and health system in Spain.

Among the less common themes raised were the necessary protection of Christianity and the danger of destruction of the European Christian civilization (Serbia and Bulgaria's center to center-right journalists).

Political Elites

Journalists identified the actions of political elites as an issue. While a right-wing Serbian journalist connected anti-elitism with conspiracy theories and attacks against the 'enemies of the people', the Czech public service and left-wing journalists mentioned the 'urban elites', intellectuals, the traditional/mainstream media, and people with an education in the humanities (the so-called 'coffee house' set) as the typical targets of

populist criticism. European (dis)integration and EU criticism as important populist issues are mentioned by center to left-wing journalists from France, Denmark, and the Czech Republic. That said, Euroscepticism is not as widespread as might have first been thought.

Crisis of Democracy

One of the most frequent responses related populism's rise to a perceived crisis of liberal democracy and, in particular, the lack of responsiveness of mainstream political parties who have lost the trust of society and are perceived to be an elite, insisting on consensual solutions. Journalists across Europe saw this crisis of legitimacy as leading to voter disengagement from mainstream politics; some noted specifically weak national democratic cultures (Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey).

There were other demand-side issues mentioned by journalists. Globalization was raised by journalists from Bosnia and the Czech Republic as the driving force behind changing values leading to social changes in gay and minority rights. Journalists from the Czech Republic also cited Russian interference contributing to confusion and distrust in the Czech Republic. These were references from journalists working in media outlets with different political orientations.

Supply-Side Factors

In terms of supply-side factors, interviewees were asked whether the personal characteristics of particular political actors played a role in populism's popularity. Almost all journalists (apart from those from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Portugal, and France) thought they did not. However, journalists from Bosnia, Serbia, and Italy referred to the importance of particular politicians in gaining support for populism, and an Italian journalist also referred to the role of charisma. A second reason given by journalists related to populist politicians' and parties' effective response to the trends mentioned above. Populist politicians and parties were perceived as openly naming problems and raising important issues that people are concerned about such as unemployment, corruption, and migration.

Respondents pointed to their ability to trigger powerful emotions such as hope and fear. A journalist from Bosnia suggested that populists know how to play the fear card by inventing threats or, in the opinion of another Bosnian journalist, fanning nationalist feelings. Journalists from the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Greece stated that populists lie to the people but that they do so in a way which seems to make complicated issues comprehensible. Indeed, one of the key reasons for their popularity, in the view of most journalists, was precisely this ability to offer apparently simple solutions to complex issues that are understood by ordinary people. Populist politicians were accused of saying what the people

want to hear and, in the view of journalists from Bulgaria and Hungary, engaging with their dreams and their frustrations, offering themselves as a kind of messiah or savior. Journalists from Italy mentioned how populist campaigns manage to align themselves successfully with public opinion and use an 'Americanized' or professionalized approach to campaigns. Journalists from Romania, Greece, and Portugal suggested that the success of UKIP, Donald Trump, and Brexit had provided a spur to populism. Populists in Greece, Portugal, and Italy were considered to target less well-educated groups and those who live in rural and marginalized areas and follow politics through television and social media rather than through newspapers.

In sum, there was commonality in journalists' views across Europe about the reasons for populism's popularity, with some nationally specific causes being identified in individual countries. There was little difference in views between journalists working for mainstream news outlets and those considered to be populist, nor in relation to the ideological profiles of media outlets or between regions. It should be noted that in the view of some journalists, any issue had the capacity to be populist. Two journalists in Hungary, both of whom work for media outlets of center-left political orientation, argued that populism can be related to anything, in the sense that populist approaches can be applied to any social issue. A Danish journalist, working for a tabloid newspaper, claimed, in a similar way, that 'any issue can be discussed in a populist manner'. For these journalists it was not so much the issue itself, but more the way it was communicated to the public—any issue could be expressed in a populist manner.

The Consequences of Populism

Given that populism was seen overwhelmingly as a malign force, the probability that the consequences of populism were also seen as mainly negative was also high. When journalists were asked by the interviewers what they thought the consequences of populism were, both for their own countries and for democracies generally, the picture painted by journalists across the sample was clear: Populism had mainly negative consequences for democracy, both in their own country and in general. In fact, all journalists from Bosnia, Czech Republic, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, and Portugal only referred to negative consequences.

Negative Consequences

Journalists frequently mentioned that populism delegitimizes democracy and its institutions in their countries (for example, Bosnia, Greece, Italy, Romania, Serbia, or Spain), it leads to more polarization, and in some cases, even radicalization and fear-mongering (mentioned by journalists

in Bosnia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Serbia, Turkey, and France). Populism also degrades public debates by over-simplifying complicated societal issues and ignoring 'real' problems (mentioned by journalists in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, or Serbia), or exacerbating bigotry, racism, prejudices, and xenophobic attitudes. The main consequences for democracy in general were related to its overall undermining of trust in its institutions. The economic and policy consequences mentioned by journalists were also mostly just as negative. For example, populism leads to poor decisions for the economy and to ineffective and overly biased policy-making.

Positive Consequences

Only four journalists (from Hungary, Italy, Spain, France) mentioned that populism has positive consequences, and from these, only one (Hungary) was employed at a media outlet labeled as populist by journalists. The positive consequences included were, first, increased citizen participation. The appearance of populist movements can further inclusionary politics by expanding democratic participation of previously marginalized social groups and by introducing different issues into the agenda. Second, some noted the revitalization of democracy and a renewal of the political class as a potential positive outcome. Populism may also have a positive consequence for the development of democratic societies. Such benefits of populism can be observed in Latin American populism, and it was discussed in Europe with the emergence of political actors such as Podemos in Spain. The most commonly mentioned positive effects were associated with the political system, the quality and resilience of democracy, particularly representative democracy, and democratic institutions. Social effects were also considered in the sense of populism improving political participation.

Although, according to this sample of journalists, the consequences were not the same everywhere, some patterns emerged. The tendency to consider populism harmful was more pronounced when journalists came from countries with populist political actors in government. Taking social effects as another example, these can be mainly positive or negative depending on whether interviewees are thinking about left or right-wing populism. It was notable that some consequences of populism seem to overarch most perspectives: radicalization of positions and over-simplification of issues.

In sum, the themes that emerge from the interviews about the consequences were de-legitimization and erosion of democratic institutions, lack of trust in representative democracy, shallow politics, malleability of the truth, instrumentalization of fear and anxiety, fragmentation, and discrimination; but, on a positive note, citizen participation and renewal of politics. Moreover, journalists across countries seem to agree on these themes with limited systematic differences across the sample.

Media Outlets as Supporters or Critics of Populism

Journalists were asked if media outlets in their countries were broadly supportive or critical of populism. The responses, perhaps not surprisingly, were varied. The analysis of the interviews showed that in most of the countries, the news media were seen to be critical of populism and it was only in the cases of Bosnia, Greece, and Turkey that all the interviewees stated that in general the media were not critical regardless of the type of media and its political leaning. Portugal was the only country where all journalists agreed that the media tends to be critical toward populist discourse. In the words of a journalist, a possible explanation is the critical awareness by journalists of the consequences of this type of politics.

Media as Critics of Populism

A common feature in most of the interviews was that left-wing media outlets were considered to be the main opponents of populism. This was also the case for quality newspapers where journalists seemed to be more aware of their social role and democratic responsibility, compared to other media. A good example can be found in the interviewee from a French center-left quality newspaper, who underlined that there was a critical consensus: 'It is consensual to criticize [populism] and therefore—as a backlash—we are harshly criticized [in our turn]. This strengthens the break between media and populism'. Another feature was that for the mass-market or tabloid media, the boundary between the popular and populists was blurred since they want to speak the language of the people, leading to an increasing simplification and dramatization of politics.

Media as Supporters of Populism

In Bosnia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey, the media are widely perceived as supportive of and, to some degree, the creators of populism and populist messages, while in Italy, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, and France, the media is largely seen as challenging populism. This ties to some extent with the findings of Blassnig et al. in this volume, which show journalists are most likely to include populist messages in the news in Bulgaria and Greece, and least likely in Italy and Serbia.

One of the primary reasons for media support for populist policies mentioned by journalists in the sample countries was media ownership by political actors and the economic power and political power of ruling elites, including governments. Political ties and close relations of media and political actors were frequently cited by the journalists. Other factors were also considered. Rather than explanations based on the centrality of political actors' power, in Greece and Hungary, interviewed journalists suggested that 'political stances of media institutions'

were a determining factor for support for populist policies. As a result, pro-government media can be supportive, while opposition media take a more critical stance. In the Greek case, the media was perceived as the promoter of populism because of a mutual need for simplification, and because of populist production of fake news. In Italy, it was considered that the media boost populism by covering their permanent political campaigning. Some interviewees identified the underlying reasons for media support, such as media ownership and strong ties between media owners or journalists and political actors, as an issue (Bosnia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia); in others, they identified small media markets (Bulgaria, Hungary) and lack of strong journalist standards (Denmark, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Turkey).

Some of these characteristics were linked to the socialization of the elite (strong ties between owners or journalists and politicians, or journalistic standards), while others are much closer to the media market, which is linked to economic questions (small market). Moreover, several aspects related to the relevance of populist parties in the political and parliamentary life of a given country, the political leaning of the media outlets considered, and the type of media, i.e., quality/public vs. tabloid/commercial media.

However, media support for populism is also considered an outcome of the media's own deficiencies. For instance, in Bosnia, the analysis of our sample shows that poor regulation or lack of understanding about the role of media in democracies can encourage support for populist policies through certain news media outlets. Lastly, media was assumed to be organically populist in some countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, and Turkey, acting as a mediator between political actors and the public, transmitting populist discourse and policies. The characterizations of the media by some journalists as a mediator of populism corresponds with this idea.

What could be seen in popular media was that they give space to populism through opinionated articles. Since the thoughts, or sometimes even the lines, from one article appear in articles by other media, the connections between these media outlets are visible. Some of the interviewees described this process as dysfunctional press. Some interviewees noted that some journalists are standing with populist parties; therefore manipulated or moderated messages will dominate the news cycle that will undermine the non-populist media's agenda.

In sum, overall there were no clear patterns across countries or regions. In some, the media were seen as supportive, while in others they were critical. The reasons for support often concerned political ties, a lack of strong journalistic standards, or competitive media market. Overall, where there was more criticism it was perceived to emanate from left-leaning media and quality newspapers.

Conclusion

The interviews provided valuable insight into media professionals' perceptions of populism and populist politicians. The design allowed for important consideration of the national and media contexts in order to enable the authors to detect any patterns in perceptions.

Perhaps not surprisingly, all those interviewed were aware of populism and, perhaps again not surprisingly, there was no single definition of populism. All journalists interviewed were able to provide a working definition, even if in some cases it was vague. The emphasis varied. For some, it was an ideology and for others, it was, in effect, electioneering, part of the political game. Others emphasized the problematic nature of the concept itself, it being, in the words of one journalist, an empty signifier, a label that could be applied in a variety of contexts. There was some critical reflection, if limited to a few journalists. Most journalists were able to provide examples of populist politicians from their own countries and although some were reticent about naming any, all were able to point to international examples. Most definitions accentuated the negative, although a very small minority identified positive positions too.

In reflecting on the reasons for the popularity of populist journalists, it was clear that there were several demand and supply-side factors such as immigration, and the ability of populists to capitalize on these. Populist politicians were considered effective in responding to problems. This interplay between conditions and politicians seemed to be true across countries and media outlets.

In terms of the issues underlying populism, immigration was seen as the main issue associated with the rise of populism, however, this was by no means the same for all countries. Economic issues, such as the financial crisis, were seen as important factors in Spain, Greece, and Romania, and a number of nationally specific issues also emerged. Others pointed to religion in general and Islam in particular, and ethnic minority/majority group relations. These were interrelated themes, affecting mainly the economic prosperity and social cohesion of European societies. Generally, however, the views of journalists regarding the key issues driving populism seem to reflect the findings of academic research (see, for example, the introduction to this volume). Therefore, we can assert that, at least in this respect, decisions on how to cover populist actors and the social underpinnings of their success seem to be grounded in appropriate notions of the problem.

The journalists were aware of the consequences of populism. Again, these were seen as largely negative across countries, and included: de-legitimization and erosion of democratic institutions; lack of trust in representative democracy; shallow politics; malleability of the truth; instrumentalization of fear and anxiety; fragmentation; and discrimination. On a positive note, some mentioned increased citizen participation and renewal of politics.

This negative sense was especially palpable in countries where populists were in government. There was also variation depending on whether the journalists were referring to right or left-wing populism, the latter being seen more positively. There was also a tendency to consider populism to be harmful when journalists came from countries where populist political actors were in government. In terms of the social effects, whether these were mainly positive or negative depended to some extent on whether interviewees were thinking about left or right-wing populism.

In reflecting on the role of the media in the rise of populism, some journalists considered the media to be supportive while others considered it critical. They articulated the reasons for media support for populism as related to political ties and lack of strong journalist standards or a competitive media market. Overall, critical media tended to be the left-leaning media and quality news outlets. This, however, is perhaps not surprising given the fact that in most of the countries under study, right-wing populist parties have been more successful than left-wing parties.

As noted, those involved in the study were interested in whether there were any clear patterns in journalists' perceptions of populism. There were no clear regional differences in our sample on any of the issues. Obviously, the respective national situations regarding populism and the part played by the media had a huge impact on perceptions of populism. Similar to other results presented in this book, this finding suggests that over-generalizing the causes and mechanisms involved in populist success may often be inappropriate. There was also little distinction between the media outlets journalists work for. Our findings echo Maurer et al. in this volume, although those working for outlets that supported populist parties did have a more positive view of populism than those who did not. There were some shared perceptions in some countries in the study where populist parties were in power, but this by no means applied to all. Overall, the lack of strong patterns might be a product of the sample size and the nature of the sample, but also might suggest that journalists share many common understandings of populism, its causes and consequences, their own role, and that of the media more generally in populism's spread.

Note

1. In addition to the listed authors, other members of the COST Action were involved in the design, data collection, and analysis stages: Nedzma Dzananovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina); Dobrinka Peicheva (Bulgaria); Lilia Raycheva (Bulgaria); Gaël Villeneuve (France); and Delia Balaban (Romania). This study benefited from funding from the following institutions: Bulgarian Science Research Fund, references DCOST 01/01-17.05.2017 and DCOST 01/02-17.05.2017; Czech Science Foundation (GACR) Standard Grant 17-17085S; Danish research program 'Reforming Welfare State Institutions' from the University of Southern Denmark; Hungarian budget and European Social Fund, project number EFOP-3.6.2-16-2017-00007; and Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, reference IF/01451/2014/CP1239/CT0004.

References

- Aalberg, T., Esser, E., Reinemann, C., Strömbäck, J., & de Vreese, C. H. (Eds.). (2017). *Populist political communication in Europe*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bartolini, S. (2011). *Political parties, ideology and populism in the post-crisis Europe*. Poros Conference, 7–10 July 2011. Retrieved from <http://european-seminars.eliampep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Stefano-Bartolini-Paper.pdf>
- Cassidy, W. P. (2007). Online news credibility: An examination of the perceptions of newspaper journalists. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 478–498. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00334.x
- de Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: A new perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 423–438. doi:10.1177/1940161218790035
- Hameleers, M., Bos, L., Fawzi, N., Reinemann, C., Andreadis, I., Corbu, N., . . . Weiss-Yaniv, N. (2018). Start spreading the news: A comparative experiment on the effects of populist communication on political engagement in sixteen European countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 517–538. doi:10.1177/1940161218786786
- Hubé, N., & Truan, N. (2016). France: The reluctance to use the word populism as a concept. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, & C. H. de Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 181–194). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Levitsky, S., & Loxton, J. (2013). Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes. *Democratization*, 20(1), 107–136. doi:10.1080/13510347.2013.738864
- Mazzoleni, G. (2014). Mediatization and political populism. In F. Esser & J. Strömbäck (Eds.), *Mediatization of politics* (pp. 42–56). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mazzoleni, G., Stewart, J., & Horsfield, B. (Eds.). (2003). *The media and neo-populism: A contemporary comparative analysis*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2012). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy?* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Pasquino, G. (2008). Populism and democracy. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European democracy* (pp. 15–29). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pfetsch, B. (2014). The idea of political communication cultures and its empirical correlates. In B. Pfetsch (Ed.), *Political communication cultures in Europe: Attitudes of political actors and journalists in nine countries* (pp. 13–30). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stanyer, J. (2007). *Modern political communication: Mediated politics in uncertain times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Strömbäck, J., & Karlson, M. (2011). Who's got the power? Journalists' perceptions of changing influences over the news. *Journalism Practice*, 5(6), 643–656. doi:10.1080/17512786.2011.592348
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Van Dalen, A., & Van Aelst, P. (2014). The media as political agenda-setters: Journalists' perceptions of media power in eight West European countries. *West European Politics*, 37(1), 42–64. doi:10.1080/01402382.2013.814967
- Wettstein, M., Esser, F., Schulz, A., Wirz, D., & Wirth, W. (2018). News media as gatekeepers, critics and initiators of populist communication: How journalists in ten countries deal with the populist challenge. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 476–495. doi:10.1177/1940161218785979

4 Politicians' Perceptions of Populism and the Media

A Cross-National Study Based on Semi-Structured Interviews¹

Susana Salgado, James Stanyer, Gergő Hajzer, David Nicolas Hopmann,²
Bente Kalsnes, Guido Legnante,
Artur Lipiński, Norbert Merkovity,
Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, and
Karen B. Sanders³

Introduction

Why is it important to study politicians' perceptions of populism? The way in which something is regarded and understood is of the utmost importance for its impact on politics and society in general. Given the complexities in defining 'populism' and understanding its meaning, and in view of it being commonly referred to as a 'vague', 'slippery', 'elusive' concept (e.g., Canovan, 1981, 1984; Taggart, 2000; Barr, 2009; Lucardie, 2009; Woods, 2014), this study addresses the concept and its potential implications through the views of politicians who represent some of the most important political parties in 11 European countries and who are therefore important opinion-makers. The main objective is to discern what politicians from the various countries and different types of political parties understand by populism and how they perceive the causes and implications of these phenomena in their countries, and, more broadly, in European and global contexts.

Interviews were conducted with politicians from 11 European countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain. The sample is therefore composed of countries representing different regions in Europe, including from Southeastern, Eastern, Central, Northern, and Southern Europe. The political parties were selected taking into account their overall electoral expression in their respective countries and their representativeness on the right-left political spectrum. In addition, populist and non-populist parties were included in all countries, except Romania. The study therefore includes a varied sample of political parties, including mainstream and fringe, center-left and center-right, radical and/or extreme left and right, and populist and non-populist parties (for further information about the